



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 15, 2005

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STATE OFFERS FREE RAINWATER HARVESTING SYSTEMS TO WILMINGTON RESIDENTS

BOSTON - The Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) is offering a limited number of free rainwater harvesting systems to Wilmington residents this summer. The systems are being provided through a Targeted Watersheds Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for the Ipswich River, and are aimed at reducing the amount of water taken from the river.

“The state is excited about this partnership with Wilmington residents to use these rainwater harvesting systems to partially replace the use of public water for irrigation purposes and, ultimately, improve flows in the Ipswich River,” said DCR Acting Commissioner Stephen R. Pritchard.

“We are pleased to see this progress on EPA’s Targeted Watershed grant aimed at preserving the Ipswich River,” said Robert W. Varney, regional administrator of EPA’s New England regional office. “EPA is committed to resolving the complex challenge of restoring the flow to this once vital river.”

The rainwater harvesting systems consist of tanks that collect rainwater from rooftop downspouts and then store the water for later use outdoors, such as in the lawn or garden. In addition to the storage tank, the systems include a pressure pump, a spigot for a hose, and a meter to measure flow. DCR is offering up to 35 systems in two sizes, 200 gallons and 800 gallons, and two larger systems that would store up to 10,000 gallons.

“The use of collected rainwater could have a significant impact in periods of low rainfall,” said Sara Cohen, DCR Water Resources Specialist, who is the Ipswich River Grant Project Manager. “The less water people use from the tap, the less stress on the river, particularly during dry periods.”

By some calculations, lawn watering accounts for 15 to 20 million gallons per day of water use in the Ipswich River watershed, according to Cohen.

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“Interestingly, the amount of water used for lawn watering equals the amount of water scientists estimate we would need to return to the Ipswich River to provide healthy flows again,” Cohen said.

“A 500-square-foot roof area can collect about 150 gallons of water in one of our typical small storms,” said Phil Reidy of Rainwater Recovery Systems, who will be installing the systems for DCR. “With a slightly larger roof area, a 200-gallon tank will fill completely in one of these typical half-inch storms,” explained Reidy. “Naturally, the larger the collection area, the larger the volume of water collected.”

The rainwater harvesting project is one of nine demonstration projects being funded by the EPA grant to study ways to restore a healthy volume of flow to the Ipswich River. DCR will measure the volume of water pumped from the rainwater harvesting systems. “Most of this is water that would otherwise have come from the tap,” explained Cohen. “We want to study what would happen in the watershed if more people used rainwater instead of tap water for their outdoor watering needs.”

DCR is planning to install the majority of the rainwater harvesting systems in Wilmington, which lies within the sensitive headwaters of the Ipswich River watershed, where water withdrawals have more severe impacts on the river.

Wilmington’s water supply has been extremely stressed since February 2003, when contamination in the Maple Meadow Brook Aquifer forced the town to shut down five of its wells. Since then, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has required the town to ban sprinkler systems and severely restrict outdoor water use.

“We’re excited to participate in the DCR study,” said Mike Woods, Superintendent of Wilmington’s Water Department. “We may be facing a complete ban on outdoor watering in the future, so we’re very interested in seeing how rainwater harvesting can help reduce demands on our water supply.”

Other grant project partners include the Ipswich River Watershed Association and the U.S. Geological Survey as well as the Towns of Wilmington, Reading, North Reading, Topsfield, Middleton, Hamilton and Peabody.

Cohen of DCR and Reidy of Rainwater Recovery Systems will present information on the project to the Wilmington Board of Selectmen on June 27. The Board of Selectmen’s meeting is broadcast at 7:00 p.m. on Wilmington Community TV, WCTV, Channel 22.

For more information or to express interest in receiving one of the rainwater harvesting systems, contact Sara Cohen at (617) 626-1374 or e-mail sara.cohen@state.ma.us.

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